

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 22, 2026**

**“And You Forgave”
Psalm 32**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our psalm this morning tells a story of silence, speech, and celebration: painful silence, honest speech, and joyful celebration. And it begins in silence—a kind of pained silence; it’s the silence of concealment, of hiding that which shouldn’t be hidden.

“While I kept silence,” the psalmist prays,
“my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (vv. 3-4).

The psalmist describes the physical and emotional aching that came with the silence of not seeking God’s forgiveness (cf. Rohrs). The psalmist was weighed down by guilt, feeling crushed and depleted. And, as often when we’re distressed, the psalmist felt this physically: what our version translates as “my body wasted away” means, quite literally, “my bones were worn out” (Walls). All this language—the “wast[ing] away,” “groaning all day,” “dried up as by the heat”—all this describes the harm that came from silence (cf. Charry).

Now if that silence was so painful, so debilitating, we might ask: why? Why this self-imposed silence and distress? Sometimes “our failure to acknowledge our sins to God [...] result[s] [from] our failure to acknowledge them to ourselves” (Wigodsky). We put on a good front, and try to hide our failings from ourselves, from each other, even from God—though, sooner or later, our disguises inevitably fall off.

Once, when I was in seminary, a student asked a professor: “When we get to our first church, should we tell the congregation what our weaknesses are?” The professor said: “Definitely not; they’ll know soon enough, and you telling them would only spoil their fun in figuring it out for themselves!”

So the psalmist’s silence may result, at least partly, from that all-too-human tendency to pretend we’re less flawed than we are. But there’s also another layer to this kind of silence—something less psychological and more theological: sometimes our inability to acknowledge our sin before God stems from our inability to believe in God’s forgiveness.

I think we sometimes struggle to confess our sin because we struggle to believe that God truly desires to forgive us. Divine forgiveness may at times be easier to accept as a general principle: it’s one thing to believe in a forgiving God, but it’s quite another to believe that God desires to forgive us. And so we can hold back from confessing our sin to God because we can’t quite accept that God truly wishes to forgive and restore us; in effect, that painful silence becomes a denial of God’s grace (cf. Mays).

That silence needs to be broken by speech—by a particular kind of honest speech, because there’s no restoration without concrete and truthful words. As one biblical scholar writes: “When one has

wronged a wife, a parent, a friend, a neighbor—someone with whom there is a conscious relationship—and refuses to acknowledge it, to put the wrong into words so that there is speech available to be dealt with, then the wrong retained [...] become[s] part of [our] identity. It harms and hardens and diminishes” (Mays).

And just as honest words are needed to restore our interpersonal relationships, likewise honest words are needed to restore our fellowship with God—not just speech, but honest speech. How rare, in public life, is a real apology—not a self-serving non-apology-apology (not “If any of my alleged actions may unintentionally have offended anyone, then—blah, blah, blah”), but a real, honest apology. In the same way, in our confession before God, we need speech that is concrete, honest, real. And that’s precisely what we find in our psalm, when the silence of concealment at last gives way to the honesty of speech:

“Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’
and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (v. 5)

Confession of sin, when it’s misunderstood, can seem gloomy or negative—or, at the very least, awkward. When I was in seminary, I used to preach at a number of churches in and around Montreal. I once led two services, back-to-back, at two different rural churches—requiring me to rush from one church to the other without any time to spare: I arrived at the second church, where I’d never been before; I located the pulpit, gathered my notes, then the service began—as always, in Presbyterian worship—with a prayer of confession.

I recall thinking how socially odd this was, that I hadn’t yet met the congregation, and the first thing they heard me say was me telling God how badly they’d been acting: ‘I haven’t actually met these people, but God just wait till you hear what they’ve been doing!’ Really, confession of sin can seem, at the very least, strange.

Yet we totally misunderstand confession of sin if we think the point is to stew in our own failures and wallow in our mistakes—because confession of sin is, ultimately, not about us: it’s about God, and God’s desire to repair our brokenness through forgiveness. This is why confession cannot be excluded from our worship, from our theology, or from our lives—because confession of sin is fundamentally our affirmation of God’s mercy, our affirmation of God’s compassion, our affirmation of God’s willingness to forgive. And that is why confession leads to joy:

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered,” says the psalmist.
“Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (vv. 1-2).

Our psalm began in silence; yet, as that silence gave way to honest speech and the joy of forgiveness, our psalm is transformed from pained silence to the joyful sounds of celebration. No more silence; now the psalm bursts with the sounds of joy—of prayer and praise and celebration:

“Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; [...] you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. [...] Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart” (vv. 6, 7, 11).

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, this psalm tells a story of silence, speech, and celebration: painful silence, honest speech, and joyful celebration. And we saw how that painful silence of concealment was broken by the honest speech of confession—inviting in the joy of God’s forgiveness and renewal, which awaited all along...

In all that language describing the painful silence—the psalmist spoke of “groaning” (v. 3), the “wast[ing]” (v. 3), the “dr[ying] up” (v. 4)—one of the most piercing images is the heavy hand of God: “For day and night,” we heard the psalmist pray, “your hand was heavy upon me” (v. 4). Yet I’ve got to wonder: when we keep silence, is God’s hand really heavy upon us? Or do we make God’s hand heavy upon us—the longer we deny God’s mercy, deny God’s compassion, deny God’s willingness to forgive? Or is the heaviness of God’s hand in fact our experience of God pushing us to be honest about ourselves, so that we can experience the joy of forgiveness?

Once, when I was a minister in Northern Ontario, a young man from a community group was at the church. He walked past my Study several times, pacing nervously, not saying a word; clearly something was weighing upon him. Eventually, he broke the silence: “Can you do that thing,” he asked, his voice quivering, “to make a person’s sins go away?” I told him I can’t do that—but God is compassionate and forgiving, and God can do that. I led us in a little prayer, confessing before God that we both needed forgiveness and a new start; and when he left, compared to how he came in, you could see the physical transformation. God’s hand, it seemed, had been heavy upon him—and had pushed him from silence to speech to the joy of forgiveness. Amen.